

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Moving the Centre, The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms, 1993

Chapter 7

The Writer in a Neo-colonial State

The African writer who emerged after the Second World War has gone through three decisive decades which also mark three nodal stages in his growth. He has gone, as it were, through three ages within only the last thirty years or so: the age of the anti-colonial struggle; the age of independence; and the age of neo-colonialism.

First was the fifties, the decade of the high noon of the African people's anti-colonial struggles for full independence. The decade was heralded, internationally, by the triumph of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and by the independence of India in 1947. It was the decade of the Korean revolution, the Vietnamese defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, the Cuban people's ouster of Batista, the stirrings of heroic independence and liberation movements in Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. In Africa the decade saw the Nasserite national assertion in Egypt culminating in the triumphant nationalisation of the Suez canal, armed struggles by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, Mau Mau, against British colonialism and by FLN against French colonialism in Algeria, as well as intensified resistance against the South African Apartheid regime, a resistance it responded to with the Sharpeville massacre. What marks the decade in the popular imagination, however, was the independence of Ghana in 1957 and of Nigeria in 1960 with the promise of more to follow. In Europe, the immediate post-war decades, particularly the fifties, saw consolidation of socialist gains in Eastern Europe and important social-democratic gains in the West. In the USA, the fifties saw an upsurge of civil rights struggles spearheaded by Afro-American people.

It was, in other words, the decade of tremendous anti-imperialist and anti-colonial revolutionary upheavals occasioned by the forcible intervention of the masses in

history. It was a decade of hope, the people looking forward to a bright tomorrow in a new Africa finally freed from colonialism. Kwame Nkrumah was the single most important theoretician and spokesman of this decade. *Towards Colonial Freedom*: that was in fact the title of the book Kwame Nkrumah had published at the beginning of the fifties. How sweet it must have sounded in the ears of all those who dreamt about a new tomorrow! His Ghana became a revolutionary Mecca of the entire anti-colonial movement in Africa. Hutchinson, a South African nationalist, captured Ghana's centrality to the era when he called his book – itself an account of his own life and escape from South Africa – simply, *Road to Ghana*. All the continent's nationalist roads of the fifties led to Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana. Everywhere on the continent, the former colonial slave was breaking his chains, and singing songs of hope for a more egalitarian society in its economic, political and cultural life and Nkrumah's Ghana seemed to hold the torch to that life!

The African writer we are talking about was born on the crest of the anti-colonial upheaval and worldwide revolutionary ferment. The anti-Imperialist energy and optimism of the masses found its way into the writing of the period. The very fact of his birth was itself evidence of the new assertive Africa. The writing itself, whether in poetry, drama or fiction, even where it was explanatory in intention, was assertive in tone. It was Africa explaining itself, speaking for itself and interpreting its past. It was an Africa rejecting the images of its past as drawn by the artists of imperialism. The writer even flaunted his right to use the language of the former colonial master any way he liked. No apologies. No begging. The Caliban of the colonial world had been given European languages and he was going to use them even to subvert the master.

There is a kind of self-assuredness, a confidence, if you like, in the scope and mastery of material in some of the best and most representative products of the period: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Camara Laye's *The African Child*, and Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*. The decade, in politics and in literature, was however best summed up in the very title of Peter Abraham's autobiography, *Tell Freedom*, while the optimism is all there in David Diop's poem 'Africa'. After evoking an Africa of freedom lost as well as the Africa of the current colonialism, he looks to the future with unqualified, total confidence:

Africa tell me Africa
Is this you this back that is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun
But a grave voice answers me
Impetuous son that tree young and strong

That tree there
In splendid loneliness amidst white and fading flowers
That is Africa your Africa
That grows again patiently obstinately
And its fruit gradually acquires
The bitter taste of liberty

The writer and his work were products of the African revolution even as the writer and the literature tried to understand, reflect, and interpret that revolution. The promptings of his imagination sprang from the fountain of the African anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movement of the forties and fifties. From every tongue came the same tune: Tell Freedom.

But very often the writer who sang 'Tell Freedom' in tune and time with the deepest aspirations of his society did not always understand the true dimensions of those aspirations, or rather he did not always adequately evaluate the real enemy of these aspirations. Imperialism was far too easily seen in terms of the skin pigmentation of the coloniser. It is not surprising of course that such an equation should have been made since racism and the tight caste system in colonialism had ensured that social rewards and punishments were carefully structured in the mystique of colour. *Labour* was not just *labour* but *black labour*: *capital* was not just *capital* but *white-owned capital*. Exploitation and its necessary consequence, oppression, were black. The vocabulary by which the conflict between colonial labour and imperialist capital was perceived and ideologically fought out consisted of white and black images, sometimes freely interchangeable with the terms 'European' and 'African'. The sentence or phrase was '*... when the whiteman came to Africa...*' and not '*... when the imperialist, or the colonialist, came to Africa...*' or '*... one day these whites will go...*' and not '*... one day imperialism, or these imperialists, will go...*'! Except in a few cases, what was being celebrated in the writing was the departure of the whiteman with the implied hope that the incoming Blackman by virtue of his blackness would right the wrongs and heal the wounds of centuries of slavery and colonialism. Were there classes in Africa? No! cried the nationalist politician, and the writer seemed to echo him. The writer could not see the class forces born but stunted in a racially demarcated Africa.

As a result of this reductionism to the polarities of colour and race, the struggle of African people against European colonialism was seen in terms of a conflict of values between the African and the European ways of perceiving and reacting to reality. But which African values? Which European values? Which Black values? Which White values? The values of the European imperialist bourgeoisie and of the collaborationist African petty bourgeoisie? The values of the African peasant and those of the European peasant? An undifferentiated uniformity of European, or

white, values was posited against an equally undifferentiated uniformity of African, or black, values.

This uniformity of African values was often captured in the realm of political parlance by the grandiloquent phrase, African socialism. The phrase was to be given even greater intellectual sophistication by Julius Nyerere (whose personal integrity has never been in any doubt) when in his famous paper 'Ujamaa: the basis of African socialism' he defined socialism as an attitude of mind. A millionaire (while remaining a millionaire I presume) could be a socialist, and a worker (while remaining a worker) could be a capitalist. Socialism (and therefore its opposite, imperialist capitalism) was reduced to a matter of beliefs, moral absolutes, and not that of a historically changing economic, political and cultural practice. Values without the economic, political and cultural practice that gives rise to them even as they in turn reflect that practice were seen as racially inherent in a people.

In short the writer and the literature he produced did not often take and hence treat imperialism and the class forces it generated as an integrated economic, political and cultural system whose negation and the class struggles this generated had also to be an integrated economic, political and cultural system of its opposite: national independence, democracy and socialism.

And so the writer, armed with an inadequate grasp of the extent, the nature and the power of the enemy and of all the class forces at work could only be shocked by the broken promises as his society entered the second decade.

The beginning of the sixties saw an acceleration of the independence movements. Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Congo (Brazzaville), Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali: country after country won the right to fly a national flag and to sing a national anthem. At the end of the sixties only a few smudges on the map represented old colonies. The OAU was the symbol of the new age, or rather it was the promise of greater unity to come. But if the sixties was the decade of African independence, it was also the decade when old style imperialism tried to halt the momentum of the anti-colonial struggles and the successes of the fifties. Old style imperialism tried to make a last stand. Thus Portuguese colonialism clung tenaciously to Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. In Zimbabwe, Ian Smith and his Rhodesian Front, with the active overt and covert encouragement of the big imperialist bourgeoisie, tried to create a second South Africa by means of an American-sounding Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Internationally – that is, outside of Africa – this last stand of old style imperialism was represented by the USA in South Vietnam. But US domination of South Vietnam also represented new style imperialism; that is US-led imperialism ruling through puppet regimes. Thus in Vietnam lay a clue as to what was happening to the Africa of the sixties, happening that is, to its independence from classic colonialism. New style

imperialism was dependent on the 'maturing' of a class of natives, already conceived and born by colonialism, whose positions and aspirations as a group were not in any fundamental conflict with the money-juggling classes, the financial gnomes of the real centres of power like Zurich, the City of London and Wall Street. There is a Kikuyu word, *Nyabaara*, derived from Kiswahili *Mnyapala* which adequately describes these mediators between the imperialist bourgeoisie and the mass of workers and peasants in the former colonies. George Lamming in his novel, *In the Castle of my Skin*, had called it an overseer class. The Boer racist South African regime, not to be outdone, was to caricature the new process when they too went ahead to create their own Bantustans. Bantustanism! How innovative the Boers are! But in a sense, how true!

To the majority of African people in the new states, independence did not bring about fundamental changes. It was independence with the ruler holding a begging bowl and the ruled holding a shrinking belly. It was independence with a question mark. The age of independence had produced a new class and a new leadership that was not very different from the old one. Black skins, white masks? White skins, black masks? In each of the African languages there was an attempt to explain the new phenomenon in terms of the 'White' and 'Black' symbols by which colonialism had been seen and fought out. But really, this was a new company, a company of African profiteers firmly deriving their character, power and inspiration from their guardianship of imperialist interests.

It was Frantz Fanon in his book *Les Damnés de la Terre*, first published in French in 1961 and later (1965) in English under the title *The Wretched of the Earth*, who prophetically summed up the character of this emergent phenomenon. The class that took over power after independence was an underdeveloped middle class which was not interested in putting the national economy on a new footing, but in becoming an intermediary between Western interests and the people, a handsomely paid business agent of the Western bourgeoisie:

"Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie."

I have always argued that literature written by Africans, and particularly literature of this period, cannot really be understood without a proper reading of the chapter 'Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The literature of this period was really a series of imaginative footnotes to Frantz Fanon.

The new regimes in the independent states increasingly came under pressure from external and internal sources. The external pressure came from the West who wanted these states to maintain their independence and non-alignment firmly on the side of Western economic and political interests. Where a regime showed a consistent desire to break away from the Western orbit, destabilisation through economic sabotage and political intrigue was set in motion. The US role in bringing down Lumumba and installing the Mobutu military regime in Zaire at the very beginning of the decade was a sign of things to come.

The internal pressure came from the people who soon saw that independence had brought no alleviation to their poverty and certainly no end to political repression. People saw in most of the new regimes dependence on foreigners, grand mismanagement and well-maintained police boots. To quote Fanon: 'scandals are numerous, ministers grow rich, their wives doll themselves up, the members of Parliament feather their nests and there is not a soul down to the simple policeman or the customs officer who does not join in the great procession of corruption.'

Some military intervened either at the prompting of the West or in response to what they genuinely saw and felt as the moral decay. But they too did not know what else to do with the state except to run the status quo with the gun held at the ready – not against imperialism – but against the very people the army had ostensibly stepped in to save.

Thus the sixties, the age of independence, became the era of *coups d'état* whether Western-backed or in patriotic response to internal pressures. Zaire in 1960 and 1965; Nigeria and Ghana in 1966; Sierra Leone, Sudan, Mali, Uganda: all these and more fell to the armies and by 1970 virtually every independent state had experienced a measure of military coups or threat of coups. The result was often intra-class fratricide as in the case of Zaire and Nigeria but one that dragged the masses into meaningless deaths, starvation and stagnation. Wars initiated by Nyabaaras! The era of *coups d'état* also threw up two hideous monstrosities: Bokassa and Idi Amin, two initial darlings of the West, who were to make a total mockery of the notion of independence, but who also, in these very actions, made a truthful expression of that kind of independence. Hideous as they were, they were only symbols of all the broken promises of independence.

What was wrong with Africa? What had gone wrong? The mood of disillusionment engulfed the writer and the literature of the period. It was Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* who correctly reflected the conditions that bred coups and rumours of coups.

The fictional narrator captures in the image of a house the deliberate murder of democracy by the new leadership:

“We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loudspeakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that the next phase – the extension of our house – was even more important and called for new and original tactics; is required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and break down the whole house.”

A Man of the People, coming out at about the same time as the first Nigerian military coup, had shown that a writer could be a prophet. But other writings – particularly Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, and Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* – were equally incisive in their horror at the moral decay of the new states. The writer responded to the decay by appealing to the conscience of the new class. If only they would listen! If only they would see the error of their ways! He pleaded, lamented, threatened, painted the picture of the disaster ahead, talked of a fire next time. He tried the corrective antidote of contemptuous laughter, ridicule, direct abuse with images of shit and urine, every filth imaginable. The writer often fell back upon the kind of revenge Marx once saw the progressive feudal aristocracy taking against the new bourgeoisie that was becoming the dominant class in nineteenth-century Europe. They, the aristocracy, ‘took their revenge by singing lampoons on their new master, and whispering in his ears sinister prophecies of coming catastrophe’.

In this way arose feudal socialism; half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart’s core but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of history.

The Communist Manifesto

Thus the writer in this period was still limited by his inadequate grasp of the full dimensions of what was really happening in the sixties: the international and national realignments of class forces and class alliances. What the writer often reacted to was the visible lack of moral fibre of the new leadership and not necessarily the structural basis of that lack of moral fibre. Sometimes the writer blamed the people – the recipient of crimes – as well as the perpetrators of the crimes against the people. At times the moral horror was couched in terms perilously close to blaming it all on the biological character of the people. Thus although the literature produced was incisive in its description, it was nevertheless characterised by a sense of despair. The writer in this period often retreated into individualism, cynicism, or into empty moral appeals for a change of heart.

It was the third period, the seventies, that was to reveal what really had been happening in the sixties: the transition of imperialism from the colonial to the neo-colonial age. On the international level, the US-engineered overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile showed the face of victorious neo-colonialism. The decade saw the clear ascendancy of US-dominated transnational financial and industrial monopolies in most of Asia, Africa and Latin America. This ascendancy was to be symbolised by the dominance of the IMF and the World Bank in the determination of the economies and hence the politics of the affected countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The era saw the USA surround Africa with military bases or with some kind of direct US military presence all the way from Morocco via Diego Garcia to Kenya, Egypt and of course the Mediterranean Sea. The aims of the Rapid Deployment Forces formed in the same decade were unashamedly stated as interventionist in Third World affairs, i.e. in affairs of the neo-colonies. Indeed, the decade saw an increasing readiness of former colonial powers to enter Africa militarily without even a trace of shame. The increasingly open, naked financial, industrial (e.g. Free Trade Zones etc), military and political interference of Western interests in the affairs of African countries with the active co-operation of the ruling regimes in the same countries, showed quite clearly that the so-called independence had only opened each of the African countries to wider imperialist interests. Dependence abroad, repression at home, became the national motto.

But if the seventies revealed more clearly the neo-colonial character of the African countries, the seventies also saw very important and eye-opening gains by the anti-imperialist struggles. Internationally (outside Africa), the single most important event was the defeat of the USA in Vietnam. But there were other shattering blows against neo-colonialism: Nicaragua and Iran, for instance.

In Africa, the seventies saw a victorious resurgence of anti-imperialism. The armed struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Zimbabwe had clearly gained from errors of the earlier anti-colonial movements in the fifties. They could see the enemy much more clearly and they could clearly analyse their struggles in terms that went beyond just the question of colour and race. Their enemy was imperialism and the classes that allied with imperialism. Within the independent African countries, *coups d'état* began to take on a more anti-imperialist and anti-neo-colonial character.

Although occurring in 1981 and 1983 respectively, Rawlings' coup in Ghana and Sankara's in Burkina Faso (previously Upper Volta) are the better examples of this tendency. But a more telling symbol was the emergence in the seventies of a people-based guerrilla movement fighting for a second independence. The armed liberation guerrilla movements in places like Uganda and Zaire may well come to stand to neo-colonialism what Kenya Land and Freedom Army and FLN in Algeria

stood to colonialism in the fifties. The phenomenon of university-educated youth and secondary school graduates opting to join workers and peasants in the bush to fight on a clear programme of a national democratic revolution as a first and necessary stage for a socialist transformation is something new in the Africa of the seventies. Whatever their ultimate destiny, these post-colonial guerrilla movements certainly symbolise the convergence of the worker's hammer and the peasant's machete or jembe with the pen and the gun.

The awakening to the realities of imperialism was reflected in some very important theoretical political breakthroughs in the works of Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Dan Nabudere, Bala Mohamed, Nzongola-Ntalaja and in many papers emanating from university centres in many parts of the continent. Imperialism was becoming a subject of serious and even passionate academic debate and scholarly dissertations. The Dar es Salaam debate, now published as *Debate on Class, State and Imperialism*, stands out. But other places like Ahmadu Bello University and Ife University in Nigeria, Nairobi University in Kenya, and the Universities of Cape Coast and Ghana were emerging as centres of progressive thought; but even outside the university campuses, progressive debate was raging and it is not an accident that the *Journal of African Marxists* should emerge in the seventies.

Once again this new anti-imperialist resurgence was reflected in literature. For the writer from Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau his content and imagery were clearly derived from the active struggles of the people. Even in the countries that became independent in the fifties and the sixties, the writer started taking a more and more critical stand against the anti-national, anti-democratic, neo-colonial character of the ruling regimes. He began to connect these ills not just to the moral failings or otherwise of this or that ruler, but to the perpetuation of imperialist domination through the comprador ruling class in Africa.

The writer in the seventies gradually began to take imperialism seriously. He was also against the internal classes, those new companies of profiteers that allied with imperialism. But the writer tried to go beyond just explanation and condemnation. One can sense in some of the writing of this period an edging towards the people and a search for new directions. The writer in the seventies was coming face to face with neo-colonialism. He was really a writer in a neo-colonial state. Further he was beginning to take sides with the people in the class struggle in Africa.

The writer who edged towards the people was caught in various contradictions. Where, for instance, did he stand in relation to the neo-colonial state in which he was a citizen, and within which he was trying to function?

A neo-colonial regime is, by its very character, a repressive machine. Its very being, in its refusal to break with the international and national structures of exploitation, inequality and oppression, gradually isolates it from the people. Its real power base

resides not in the people but in imperialism and in the police and the army. To maintain itself it shuts all venues of democratic expression. It, for instance, resorts to one-party rule, and since in effect the party is just a bureaucratic shell, this means resorting to one man rule, despotism à la Marquez's novel, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*! All democratic organisations are outlawed or else brought under the ruler, in which case they are emptied of any democratic life. Why then should the regime allow any democracy in the area of culture? Any democratic expression in the area of culture becomes a threat to such a regime's very peculiar brand of culture: the culture of silence and fear run and directed from police cells and torture chambers.

The Kenya that emerged from the seventies is a good illustration of the workings of a neo-colonial state. At the beginning of the decade Kenya was a fairly 'open society' in the sense that the Kenyans could still debate issues without fear of prison. But as the ruling party under Kenyatta, and later under Moi, continued cementing the neo-colonial links to the West, the Kenyan regime became more and more intolerant of any views that questioned neo-colonialism. In the fifties, Kenyans had fought to get rid of *all* foreign military presence from her soil. In 1980 the Kenyan authorities had given military base facilities to the USA. The matter was not even debated in Parliament. Kenyans learnt about it through debates in the US Congress. Now within the same decade which saw the Kenyan coast turned over for use by the US military machine, the Kenya regime had banned all centres of democratic debate. Even the university was not spared. University lecturers were imprisoned or detained without trial; among them were writers like Al Amin Mazrui and Edward Oyugi.

Another lecturer, also a writer and Kenya's foremost national historian, Maina wa Kinyatti, has served a prison sentence in a maximum security prison for doing intensive work on Mau Mau. Maina wa Kinyatti was educated in Kenya and the United States of America. On returning to Kenya at the beginning of the seventies, he joined the History Department at Kenyatta University College. He became very concerned that ten years after the Kenya Land and Freedom Army had forced colonialism to retreat and allow Kenya a measure of self-rule and independence, no work had been done by Kenyan scholars on the actual history and literature of these who died that Kenya might be free. He set about collecting the songs and poems of the Mau Mau era, some of which he later edited into a book: *Thunder From the Mountain: Mau Mau Patriotic Songs*. He also started work on the whole anti-colonial resistance within the context of the Kenyan history of struggle from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. The result? He languished in jail, going blind, for 6½ years until October 1989.

Over the same decade, the regime became very intolerant of theatre and any cultural expression that sided with the people. Kamiriithu Community Education

and Cultural Centre's Open Air Theatre was razed to the ground. A number of plays were stopped. Kenyan writers like Micere Mugo, Ngugi wa Mirii, Kimani Gecau, were forced into exile. In February 1985, the regime climaxed its decade of intolerance by bludgeoning 12 students to death, and 150 others into hospital; 14 went to jail for 6 months joining another 10 serving long jail terms of up to 10 years. Five others were tortured and subsequently sentenced from 6 to 12 months in jail for holding an interdenominational prayer meeting in day time on an open university sports ground.

How does a writer function in such a society? He can of course adopt silence or self-censorship, in which case he ceases to be an effective writer. Or he can become a state functionary, an option some Kenyan writers have now embraced, and once again cease to be an effective writer of the people. Or he may risk jail or exile, in which case he is driven from the very sources of his inspiration. Write and risk damnation. Avoid damnation and cease to be a writer. That is the lot of the writer in the neo-colonial state.

There are other contradictions of a writer in a neo-colonial state. For whom does he write? For the people? But then what language does he use? It is a fact that the African Writers who emerged after the Second World War opted for European languages. All the major African writers wrote in English, French or Portuguese. But by and large, all the peasants and a majority of the workers – the masses – have their own languages.

Isn't the writer perpetuating, at the level of cultural practice, the very neo-colonialism he is condemning at the level of economic and political practice? For who a writer *writes* is a question which has not been satisfactorily resolved by the writers in a neo-colonial state. For the African writer, the language he has chosen already has chosen his audience.

Whatever the language the writer has opted for, what is his relationship with the content? Does he see reality in its unchangeingness or in its changeingness? To see reality in stagnation or in circles of the same movements is to succumb to despair. And yet for him to depict reality in its revolutionary transformation from the standpoint of the people – the agents of change – is once again to risk damnation by the state. For a writer who is depicting reality in its revolutionary transformation is, in effect, telling the upholders of the status quo: even this too shall pass away.

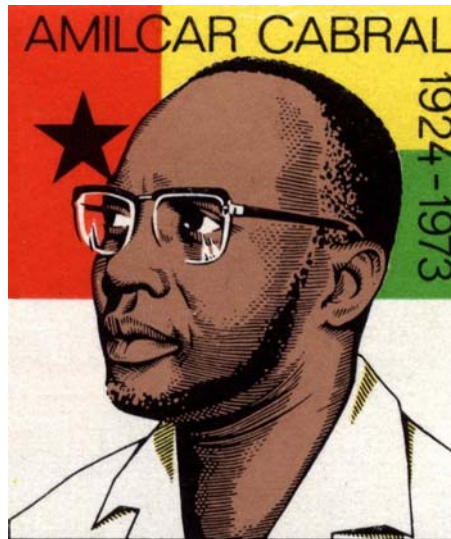
I think I have said enough about the writer in the third period – the seventies – to show that his lot, particularly when he may want to edge towards the people, is not easy.

In the world, the struggle between democratic and socialist forces for life and human progress on the one hand, and the imperialist forces for reaction and death

on the other is still going on and it is bound to become more fierce. Imperialism is still the enemy of human kind and any blow against imperialism whether in the Philippines, El Salvador, Chile, South Korea is clearly a blow for democracy and change. In Africa, the struggle of the Namibian people and of South African/Azanian people has intensified. And as the Zimbabwean, Angolan, and Mozambican struggles took the African revolution a stage further than where it had been left by the FLN and the Kenyan Land a Freedom Army in the fifties, in the same way the successful outcome of the Namibian and South African peoples' struggle will push the entire continent on to a new stage. In a special way, the liberation of South Africa is the key to the liberation of the entire continent from neo-colonialism.

Within the neo-colonial states, the anti-imperialist alliance of democratic forces will intensify the struggle against the rule of the alliance of the comprador class and imperialism. There will be more and more anti-imperialist coups of the Sankara type. There will be an increase in the Uganda type anti-neocolonial guerrilla movements. There will be greater and greater call and demand for a Pan-Africanism of the proletariat and the peasantry through their progressive democratic organisation. Each new stage in the struggle for real independence, democracy and socialism will have learnt from the errors of the previous attempts, successes and even failures. We shall see a further heightening of the war against neo-colonialism. For as in the days of colonialism, so now in the days of neo-colonialism, the African people are still struggling for a world in which they can control that which their collective sweat produces, a world in which they will control the economy, politics and culture to make their lives accord with where they want to go and who they want to be.

But as the struggle continues and intensifies, the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state will become harder and not easier. His choice? It seems to me that the African writer now, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. In that situation, he will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real languages of struggle in the actions and speech of his people, learn from their great heritage of orature, and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves. He must be part of the song the people sing as once again they take up arms to smash the neo-colonial state to complete the anti-imperialist national democratic revolution they had started in the fifties, and even earlier. A people united can never be defeated and the writer must be part and parcel of that revolutionary unity for democracy, socialism and the liberation of the human spirit to become even more human.



National Liberation and Culture

Amilcar Cabral

This text was originally delivered on February 20, 1970; as part of the Eduardo Mondlane (1) Memorial Lecture Series at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, under the auspices of The Program of Eastern African Studies. It was translated from the French by Maureen Webster.

When Goebbels, the brain behind Nazi propaganda, heard culture being discussed, he brought out his revolver. That shows that the Nazis, who were and are the most tragic expression of imperialism and of its thirst for domination--even if they were all degenerates like Hitler, had a clear idea of the value of culture as a factor of resistance to foreign domination.

History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is very easy for the foreigner to impose his domination on a people. But it also teaches us that, whatever may be the material aspects of this domination, it can be maintained only by the permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned. Implantation of foreign domination can be assured definitively only by physical liquidation of a significant part of the dominated population.

In fact, to take up arms to dominate a people is, above all, to take up arms to destroy, or at least to neutralize, to paralyze, its cultural life. For, with a strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation. At any moment, depending on internal and external factors determining the evolution of the society in question, cultural resistance (indestructible) may take on new forms (political, economic, armed) in order fully to contest foreign domination.

The ideal for foreign domination, whether imperialist or not, would be to choose:

- either to liquidate practically all the population of the dominated country, thereby eliminating the possibilities for cultural resistance;
- or to succeed in imposing itself without damage to the culture of the dominated people--that is, to harmonize economic and political domination of these people with their cultural personality.

The first hypothesis implies genocide of the indigenous population and creates a void which empties foreign domination of its content and its object: the dominated people. The second hypothesis has not, until now, been confirmed by history. The broad experience of mankind allows us to postulate that it has no practical viability: it is not possible to harmonize the economic and political domination of a people, whatever may be the degree of their social development, with the preservation of their cultural personality.

In order to escape this choice--which may be called the dilemma of cultural resistance--imperialist colonial domination has tried to create theories which, in fact, are only gross formulations of racism, and which, in practice, are translated into a permanent state of siege of the indigenous populations on the basis of racist dictatorship (or democracy).

This, for example, is the case with the so-called theory of progressive assimilation of native populations, which turns out to be only a more or less violent attempt to deny the culture of the people in question. The utter failure of this "theory," implemented in practice by several colonial powers, including Portugal, is the most obvious proof of its lack of viability, if not of its inhuman character. It attains the highest degree of absurdity in the Portuguese case, where Salazar affirmed that Africa does not exist.

This is also the case with the so-called theory of apartheid, created, applied and developed on the basis of the economic and political domination of the people of Southern Africa by a racist minority, with all the outrageous crimes against humanity which that involves. The practice of apartheid takes the form of unrestrained exploitation of the labor force of the African masses, incarcerated and repressed in the largest concentration camp mankind has ever known.

These practical examples give a measure of the drama of foreign imperialist domination as it confronts the cultural reality of the dominated people. They also suggest the strong, dependent and reciprocal relationships existing between the cultural situation and the economic (and political) situation in the behavior of human societies. In fact, culture is always in the life of a society (open or closed), the more or less conscious result of the economic and political activities of that society, the more or less dynamic expression of the kinds of relationships which

prevail in that society, on the one hand between man (considered individually or collectively) and nature, and, on the other hand, among individuals, groups of individuals, social strata or classes.

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society, as well as among different societies. Ignorance of this fact may explain the failure of several attempts at foreign domination--as well as the failure of some international liberation movements.

Let us examine the nature of national liberation. We shall consider this historical phenomenon in its contemporary context, that is, national liberation in opposition to imperialist domination. The latter is, as we know, distinct both in form and in content from preceding types of foreign domination (tribal, military-aristocratic, feudal, and capitalist domination in time free competition era).

The principal characteristic, common to every kind of imperialist domination, is the negation of the historical process of the dominated people by means of violently usurping the free operation of the process of development of the productive forces. Now, in any given society, the level of development of the productive forces and the system for social utilization of these forces (the ownership system) determine the mode of production. In our opinion, the mode of production whose contradictions are manifested with more or less intensity through the class struggle, is the principal factor in the history of any human group, the level of the productive forces being the true and permanent driving power of history.

For every society, for every group of people, considered as an evolving entity, the level of the productive forces indicates the stage of development of the society and of each of its components in relation to nature, its capacity to act or to react consciously in relation to nature. It indicates and conditions the type of material relationships (expressed objectively or subjectively) which exists among the various elements or groups constituting the society in question. Relationships and types of relationships between man and nature, between man and his environment. Relationships and type of relationships among the individual or collective components of a society. To speak of these is to speak of history, but it is also to speak of culture.

Whatever may be the ideological or idealistic characteristics of cultural expression, culture is an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or

because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production. Culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society, which may be more or less influenced by external factors. History allows us to know the nature and extent of the imbalance and conflicts (economic, political and social) which characterize the evolution of a society; culture allows us to know the dynamic syntheses which have been developed and established by social conscience to resolve these conflicts at each stage of its evolution, in the search for survival and progress.

Just as happens with the flower in a plant, in culture there lies the capacity (or the responsibility) for forming and fertilizing the seedling which will assure the continuity of history, at the same time assuring the prospects for evolution and progress of the society in question. Thus it is understood that imperialist domination by denying the historical development of the dominated people, necessarily also denies their cultural development. It is also understood why imperialist domination, like all other foreign domination for its own security, requires cultural oppression and the attempt at direct or indirect liquidation of the essential elements of the culture of the dominated people.

The study of the history of national liberation struggles shows that generally these struggles are preceded by an increase in expression of culture, consolidated progressively into a successful or unsuccessful attempt to affirm the cultural personality of the dominated people, as a means of negating the oppressor culture. Whatever may be the conditions of a people's political and social factors in practicing this domination, it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement.

In our opinion, the foundation for national liberation rests in the inalienable right of every people to have their own history whatever formulations may be adopted at the level of international law. The objective of national liberation is therefore, to reclaim the right, usurped by imperialist domination, namely: the liberation of the process of development of national productive forces. Therefore, national liberation takes place when, and only when, national productive forces are completely free of all kinds of foreign domination. The liberation of productive forces and consequently the ability to determine the mode of production most appropriate to the evolution of the liberated people necessarily opens up new prospects for the cultural development of the society in question, by returning to that society all its capacity to create progress.

A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths

of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture. Thus, it may be seen that if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.

On the basis of what has just been said, we may consider the national liberation movement as the organized political expression of the culture of the people who are undertaking the struggle. For this reason, those who lead the movement must have a clear idea of the value of the culture in the framework of the struggle and must have a thorough knowledge of the people's culture, whatever may be their level of economic development.

In our time it is common to affirm that all peoples have a culture. The time is past when, in an effort to perpetuate the domination of a people, culture was considered an attribute of privileged peoples or nations, and when, out of either ignorance or malice, culture was confused with technical power, if not with skin colour or the shape of one's eyes. The liberation movement, as representative and defender of the culture of the people, must be conscious of the fact that, whatever may be the material conditions of the society it represents, the society is the bearer and creator of culture. The liberation movement must furthermore embody the mass character, the popular character of the culture--which is not and never could be the privilege of one or of some sectors of the society.

In the thorough analysis of social structure which every liberation movement should be capable of making in relation to the imperative of the struggle, the cultural characteristics of each group in society have a place of prime importance. For, while the culture has a mass character, it is not uniform; it is not equally developed in all sectors of society. The attitude of each social group toward the liberation struggle is dictated by its social group toward the liberation struggle is dictated by its economic interests, but is also influenced profoundly by its culture. It may even be admitted that these differences in cultural level explain differences in behaviour toward the liberation movement on the part of individuals who belong to the same socio-economic group. It is at the point that culture reaches its full significance for each individual: understanding and integration in to his environment, identification with fundamental problems and aspirations of the society, acceptance of the possibility of change in the direction of progress.

In the specific conditions of our country--and we would say, of Africa--the horizontal and vertical distribution of levels of culture is somewhat complex. In fact, from villages to towns, from one ethnic group to another, from one age group to another, from the peasant to the workman or to the indigenous intellectual who is more or less assimilated, and, as we have said, even from individual to individual within the same social group, the quantitative and qualitative level of culture varies

significantly. It is of prime importance for the liberation movement to take these facts into consideration.

In societies with a horizontal social structure, such as the Balante, for example, the distribution of cultural levels is more or less uniform, variations being linked uniquely to characteristics of individuals or of age groups. On the other hand, in societies with a vertical structure, such as the Fula, there are important variations from the top to the bottom of the social pyramid. These differences in social structure illustrate once more the close relationship between culture and economy, and also explain differences in the general or sectoral behaviour of these two ethnic groups in relation to the liberation movement.

It is true that the multiplicity of social and ethnic groups complicates the effort to determine the role of culture in the liberation movement. But it is vital not to lose sight of the decisive importance of the liberation struggle, even when class structure is to appear to be in embryonic stages of development.

The experience of colonial domination shows that, in the effort to perpetuate exploitation, the colonizers not only creates a system to repress the cultural life of the colonized people; he also provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population, either by so-called assimilation of indigenous people, or by creating a social gap between the indigenous elites and the popular masses. As a result of this process of dividing or of deepening the divisions in the society, it happens that a considerable part of the population, notably the urban or peasant petite bourgeoisie, assimilates the colonizer's mentality, considers itself culturally superior to its own people and ignores or looks down upon their cultural values. This situation, characteristic of the majority of colonized intellectuals, is consolidated by increases in the social privileges of the assimilated or alienated group with direct implications for the behaviour of individuals in this group in relation to the liberation movement. A reconversion of minds--of mental set--is thus indispensable to the true integration of people into the liberation movement. Such reconversion - re-Africanization, in our case - may take place before the struggle, but it is completed only during the course of the struggle, through daily contact with the popular masses in the communion of sacrifice required by the struggle.

However, we must take into account the fact that, faced with the prospect of political independence, the ambition and opportunism from which the liberation movement generally suffers may bring into the struggle unconverted individuals. The latter, on the basis of their level of schooling, their scientific or technical knowledge, but without losing any of their social class biases, may attain the highest positions in the liberation movement. Vigilance is thus indispensable on the cultural as well as the political plane. For, in the liberation movement as elsewhere, all that glitters is not necessarily gold: political leaders--even the most famous--may be culturally alienated people. But the social class characteristics of the culture are

even more discernible in the behavior of privileged groups in rural areas, especially in the case of ethnic groups with a vertical social structure, where, nevertheless, assimilation or cultural alienation influences are non-existent or practically non-existent. This is the case, for example, with the Fula ruling class. Under colonial domination, the political authority of this class (traditional chiefs, noble families, religious leaders) is purely nominal, and the popular masses know that true authority lies with an is acted upon by colonial administrators. However, the ruling class preserves in essence its basic cultural authority over the masses and this has very important political implications.

Recognizing this reality, the colonizer who represses or inhibits significant cultural activity on the part of the masses at the base of the social pyramid, strengthens and protects the prestige and the cultural influence of the ruling class at the summit. The colonizer installs chiefs who support him and who are to some degree accepted by the masses; he gives these chiefs material privileges such as education for their eldest children, creates chiefdoms where they did not exist before, develops cordial relations with religious leaders, builds mosques, organizes journeys to Mecca, etc. And above all, by means of the repressive organs of colonial administration, he guarantees economic and social privileges to the ruling class in their relations with the masses. All this does not make it impossible that, among these ruling classes, there may be individuals or groups of individuals who join the liberation movement, although less frequently than in the case of the assimilated "petite bourgeoisie." Several traditional and religious leaders join the struggle at the very beginning or during its development, making an enthusiastic contribution to the cause of liberation.

But here again vigilance is indispensable: preserving deep down the cultural prejudices of their class, individuals in this category generally see in the liberation movement the only valid means, using the sacrifices of the masses, to eliminate colonial oppression of their own class and to re-establish in this way their complete political and cultural domination of the people.

In the general framework of contesting colonial imperialist domination and in the actual situation to which we refer, among the oppressor's most loyal allies are found some high officials and intellectuals of the liberal professions, assimilated people, and also a significant number of representatives of the ruling class from rural areas. This fact gives some measure of the influence (positive or negative) of culture and cultural prejudices in the problem of political choice when one is confronted with the liberation movement. It also illustrates the limits of this influence and the supremacy of the class factor in the behaviour of the different social groups. The high official or the assimilated intellectual, characterized by total cultural alienation, identifies himself by political choice with the traditional or religious leader who has experienced no significant foreign cultural influences.

For these two categories of people place above all principles our demands of a cultural nature--and against the aspirations of the people--their own economic and social privileges, their own class interests. That is a truth which the liberation movement cannot afford to ignore without risking betrayal of the economic, political, social and cultural objectives of the struggle.

Without minimizing the positive contribution which privileged classes may bring to the struggle, the liberation movement must, on the cultural level just as on the political level, base its action in popular culture, whatever may be the diversity of levels of cultures in the country. The cultural combat against colonial domination--the first phase of the liberation movement--can be planned efficiently only on the basis of the culture of the rural and urban working masses, including the nationalist (revolutionary) "petite bourgeoisie" who have been re-Africanized or who are ready for cultural reconversion. Whatever may be the complexity of this basic cultural panorama, the liberation movement must be capable of distinguishing within it the essential from the secondary, the positive from the negative, the progressive from the reactionary in order to characterize the master line which defines progressively a national culture.

In order for culture to play the important role which falls to it in the framework of the liberation movement, the movement must be able to preserve the positive cultural values of every well defined social group, of every category, and to achieve the confluence of these values in the service of the struggle, giving it a new dimension--the national dimension. Confronted with such a necessity, the liberation struggle is, above all, a struggle both for the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people and for the harmonization and development of these values within a national framework.

Endnotes:

1. Eduardo Mondlane was the first President of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). He was assassinated by Portuguese agents on Feb. 3, 1969.

From: <http://historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/cabralnlac.html>
